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## A NEW BOOK OF SOUTHERN VERSE.

FROM CLIFF AND SCAUR. A Collection of Verse. By Benjamin Sledd.  
New York and London: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1897. 12mo., pp. vi, 100.

It is with genuine pleasure that one lays down the first volume of a Southern poet who has not found his inspiration in sentiment or his profit in exploiting darky traits and customs. Prof. Sledd holds by the Old South in just the right way: by linking his work with that of the recognized masters of song. He does not do this so slavishly as many of his ante-bellum forerunners were wont to do—and this is to his credit—but he is as resolute as they were to uphold and reverence genuine poetic tradition. Tennyson and, perhaps, Coleridge, or some other master of the weird, seem to be his tutelary deities, and they have taught him a regard for form that gives savor even to the least mature of his poems. He will soon, I think and trust, wean himself from their kindly influence and enter upon his own heritage, but I feel sure that he will never cease to be grateful to them.

His gratitude to Tennyson receives expression not only in the title given to his volume and in the touching "Prelude," but also in such a tender, delicate poem as "Alice," and in the sweet versification of "Lilian." The indebtedness to Coleridge, perhaps to Poe also, or else to his own temperament and environment, is evidenced by the constant way in which Mr. Sledd's imagination plays around elfish legend—as, for example, in the opening poem, "A Ballad of Otter Hill." I can not think that either the Tennysonian or the Coleridgean verses are particularly worthy of note—save for their charm of fluidity and frequently felicitous diction—since they are all marked by a certain looseness of construction as regards the evolution of their central themes and by a lack of inherent value and inevitableness in their subject-matter; but as I believe that Prof. Sledd will soon devote himself to more strenuous and tangible themes, and as his volume shows many traces of original power, I shall not dwell upon this phase of his work.

I shall mention but two qualities of his verse that seem to me to give it considerable value and promise, and shall illus-

trate them by several citations. The first is a refined pessimism that does not become unbalanced; the second is an equally refined pathos that does not become sentimental. Other qualities there are, no doubt, such as the "fluidity of movement and diction," to quote Arnold, that I praised a moment since, and the occasional play of delightful fancy or of striking imagination in some of the shorter poems. But I have not space enough to comment fully upon these matters, and I prefer to let Mr. Sledd's verses speak for themselves.

Here is a poem of delicate, haunting pessimism entitled the "Mystery of the Woods."

Vaguer it seems than a vision  
Dreamed in an hour unknown;  
A grave with pines overshadowed,  
And strange wild life overgrown.  
The first of earth's dark secrets  
By curious childhood found,  
Much did I wonder what meaning  
Lay hid in that little mound.  
And once—still must I remember  
The dreary autumn day—  
All trembling with nameless terror,  
I ceased from childish play,  
Saying, "Death—what is it, mother?"  
Sadly she made reply,  
Clasping her arms about me:  
"Thou'lt find out by and by."  
But life's first perfect gladness,  
I never felt it more,  
Nor ever again was the sunshine  
So sweet as it was before.  
For long, long years I waited,  
The answer still I wait,  
And hear but darkly murmur  
The riddling lips of fate.  
When I joy in the strength of morning,  
And feel that life is good—  
Lo, right athwart my pathway  
That fateful mound in the wood.  
And when I sadly question  
What way beyond may lie,  
A silent voice makes answer,  
"Thou'lt know all by and by."

More deeply pessimistic, reminding one of Poe at times, are the verses entitled "In the Valley of the Shadow," which are too long to be quoted entire, but from which I must make two extracts. Here is the opening stanza:

No life was there in that lone land;  
Or only lived the shuddering sand—  
Blind, hungry thing—  
Which round my helpless feet would cling  
And strive to clasp me fast  
In its cold arms. There was no light,  
And yet I felt that height on height  
Shut in the dead black vast.

Equally good are these lines from the third stanza:

As seamen hear,  
And, hearing, thrill with formless fear,  
The midnight waves on unknown shore;  
So, ever growing more and more,  
Deep, dolorous sounds I heard draw near,  
And knew the illimitable sea  
Which One had said the end must be.

As an example of Mr. Sledd's power to write pathetic poetry that does not degenerate into mere sentiment, I shall quote entire his touching and psychologically true poem, called the "Mother: "

Will they not leave me in peace? Yes, dear, I am coming soon.  
What need of winter's presence at rose-crowned rites of June?  
He brings her home in triumph, the sweet young life he has won;  
And I could rejoice in a daughter, had I not lost a son.  
Long since God took my others, and now I am left alone;  
For, though I am still his mother, the wife will claim her own.  
How cold to-night was his greeting! He called me simply "Mother;"  
Those old sweet names of endearment so soon he gives to another.  
Oh, for one hour of the nights when he sat by the hearth and read,  
And 'twas to his voice I listened, and not what the dull books said;  
And often I'd fall to weeping—and yet I knew not why;  
But then we older children must have our meaningless cry;  
A moment of silence and weeping, and then my tears have done.  
May I, who have wept for nothing, not weep for the loss of a son?  
But why is my loss so bitter? 'Tis what all mothers have known;  
For, though we still are mothers, we may not claim our own.

Another pathetic poem touching deep, if often struck, chords of the suffering human heart is entitled "United:"

All day it shook the land—grim battle's thunder-tread—  
 And fields at morning green, at eve are trampled red;  
 But now on the stricken scene twilight and quiet fall;  
 Only, from hill to hill, night's tremulous voices call;  
 And comes from far along, where camp-fires warning burn,  
 The dread, hushed sound which tells of morning's sad return.

Timidly nature awakens; the stars come out overhead,  
 And a flood of moonlight breaks like a voiceless prayer for the dead,  
 And steals the blessed wind, like Odin's fairest daughter,  
 In viewless ministry, over the fields of slaughter;  
 Soothing the smitten life, easing the pang of death,  
 And bearing away on high the passing warrior's breath.

Two youthful forms are lying apart from the thickest fray,  
 The one in Northern blue, the other in Southern gray.  
 Around his lifeless foeman the arms of each are pressed,  
 And the head of one is pillowed upon the other's breast;  
 As if two loving brothers, wearied with work and play,  
 Had fallen asleep together at close of the summer day.  
 Foeman were they, and brothers? Again the battle's din,  
 With its sullen, cruel answer, from far away breaks in.

Of striking short poems and single stanzas Mr. Sledd's book affords quite a number of examples, considering its tiny proportions. Here is a poem entitled "*Insomnia*," which closes in an admirably imaginative manner:

Would'st know the saddest of sad things?  
 It is with sleepless eyes to lie,  
 Watching the weary hours go by,  
 Till weariness impatient waits  
 Beside day's grim unopened gates,  
 For all the untried morrow brings.

Here is another, called "*Dawn and the Peak*," containing an image almost if not quite equally good:

High over all one huge peak stands,  
 Flinging his Titan hands  
 To grasp the vale, a glowing cup,  
 And to the morning holds it up;  
 Then, leaning its lips to the river's edge,  
 Pours to the sun earth's sacred pledge.

An exquisite "*conceit*," as our seventeenth century ancestors would have termed it, will be found in the touching poem entitled the "*Cocoon*;" but for this, as well as for the strong verses headed "*Out of the Depths*," I must refer my

readers to Mr. Sledd's volume. Poems such as these are worth, to my mind, a dozen such shadowy pieces as the "Little People of the Hills" or "Young Clifford's Bride," which take no hold upon the heart and have no grip on life.

Finally let me quote a strong sonnet on "Life's Triumph," with the query why Mr. Sledd does not cultivate more assiduously a noble form of verse not unsuited to his powers:

The grim old bards, in lore fantastic, say  
That only they may feast in Odin's hall  
Who fall with front to foe, as heroes fall;  
But they who conquer and survive each fray  
And only yield to lingering decay;  
Who win the fatal meed of bier and pall,  
In Hela's dim, drear realms are gathered all.  
And so, 'tis not the victor's part I pray,  
But ask that other triumph over fate,  
That I may never know life's sad decline,  
With only the last barren spoils to glean  
From fields where battle's fulness late has been,  
And darkness near on which no dawn can wait;  
To pass amid life's fray be liefer mine.

In conclusion I wish to thank Mr. Sledd for the pleasure some of his verses have given me, and to express the hope that he will not let professional cares deter him from cultivating his genuine lyrical and elegiac faculty. Narrative poetry he should either eschew or endeavor more strenuously to learn the secrets of; but for lyric work he has, I think, a distinct and pleasing aptitude. For the benefit of my readers who may care to know something of the man as well as of his book, I will merely say that Mr. Sledd is a graduate of the Johns Hopkins, who is Professor of English at Wake Forest, N. C., and that, like many another Southern teacher, he is a native of Virginia—a fact one may gather from the affectionate epilogue that closes his volume.

W. P. T.